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ABSTRACT

Teaching a course in content area reading instruction means that a professor will have students with a broad range of experiences and interests, all of which must be taken into account in the instructional process by providing many opportunities for choice and self-selection. The modeling of effective teaching is a strategy that can encourage students to consider actively the role of reading instruction in their content classes and to become aware of the broad range of options available to them as teachers. The use of whole language--a theory of instruction and learning based on knowledge of language learning and language use as well as knowledge of people of whatever age and however they learn--can help in selecting activities and materials, evaluating students' progress, and shaping the educational program in a classroom. Whole language, at the college level, can be both possible and desirable--if the teaching approach is grounded on three beliefs: (1) language use is to be encouraged whenever possible; (2) language is to be kept whole and meaningful; and (3) each student learns as an individual. By carefully reviewing what is to be accomplished in the course and selecting instructional strategies, evaluation methods, and course content from a theoretical perspective consistent with whole language, the college teacher can conduct an effective whole language program. (MS)

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Whole Language In The College Classroom: One Professor's Approach

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Whole Language in the College Classroom: One Professor's Approach

One problem confronted by professors of education is that they are expected to do more than merely present sound educational theory to their students. In the eyes of many education students, theory is cheap and relatively easy to come by. In order to maintain credibility, these professors must follow through in practice the principles they advocate as part of their educational theory. That is, they must practice what they preach.

When I first began teaching education courses at the college level, the single most consistent assignment I was given during the first three years of college teaching was a course in content area reading instruction for preservice education students seeking certification at the secondary level and, on occasion, inservice teachers continuing their education. Yet my background and orientation deeply rooted in whole language and my teaching experience was overwhelmingly at the elementary level.

Most of these students did not see reading as an area of primary concern in their future teaching. Instead they thought of themselves as math teachers, English teachers, foreign language teachers, science teachers, social science teachers,

music teachers, physical education teachers or art teachers. I also realized that the state required the students to successfully complete this course in order to be certified. This indicated to me that many people would expect content area teachers to have at least a minimal background and knowledge in the area of reading instruction in content classrooms.

As a result, I believed it was incumbent upon me to teach the course on reading in the content areas in a manner consistent with my beliefs while also providing experiences and knowledge which would result in the needed background. My approach had to be consistent with my beliefs about language and the way language is learned yet at the same time account for the information and knowledge which students would be expected to know as they become teachers in the secondary schools.

In approaching this teaching opportunity, I realized that my decisions regarding teaching strategies and general approaches to instruction would have to account for these conditions. Yet I also realized that regard for academic rigor and recognition of the integrity of the disciplines of the students would also be important in the instructional approach to be taken.

THE BASIC INSTRUCTIONAL DECISIONS

The individual learners came to this course with backgrounds, experiences and interests markedly different from one another. The broad range of experiences and interests was probably the single most outstanding characteristic of the groups of students enrolled each semester in that course. These were students who had majored in different academic areas because of their specific interests, special talents or particular abilities in that area. It was important that I treat each individual with respect, that I recognize, acknowledge, accept and even support those differences. It was my job to build upon those differences through instruction.

I realized that the only way I was going to accomplish this was by providing many opportunities for choice and self-selection throughout the instructional plan. Self-selection was to be a basic strategy used to account for the range of differences in the course. My chances of success would grow as the range of options would also grow.

The students in this course were all upper division students (juniors or seniors). By recalling my own experiences as an undergraduate student, I realized that many of the students had probably already been in one or more college courses which they considered to basically irrelevant to them, either as present day students or as prospective teachers. The major impact I was likely to have on them would come through the experiences they would have rather than from the theory I

would present to them. Yet I knew that instruction had to be firmly based in theory, a theory which would become clear to them through class discussions and their personal experiences in the class. Therefore, I decided to teach the course by modeling what I consider to be effective teaching. That was to be the strategy for encouraging the students to actively consider the role of reading instruction in their content classes and to consider the broad range of options available to them as teachers.

I was aware that I was the expert in the field of reading in the content areas. I also knew that what was happening in my classroom could lead to more effective and more humane learning conditions for many students in classes as yet unformed. That led to the understanding that I was responsible for leading and directing the activities of the students in the course throughout the semester. I was the one who was ultimately accountable for what was learned, what was done and what would be remembered from that course. This was perhaps the most forceful idea which I recognized. It placed my instructional decisions where they clearly rested: ON MY SHOULDERS!

WHOLE LANGUAGE AND CONTENT AREA READING

Whole language is not a single program or approach to teaching. It is, instead, a theory of instruction and learning

based on knowledge of language learning and language use as well as knowledge of people of whatever age (children and adults) and how they learn. The teacher uses this theory as a checkpoint in selecting activities and materials, evaluating student's progress and shaping the educational program within a classroom. As one visits different whole language classes, it becomes obvious that each whole language teacher approaches instruction in a way that is unique to that teacher and that group of students. Each whole language classroom reflects the teacher's understanding of language and language learning as well as the teacher's and the student's responses to the classroom setting and interactions with each other.

I decided to frame my approach to teaching on three beliefs which I knew were common to many whole language teachers:

1. Language use is to be encouraged whenever possible. Language is at the core of learning. Without language there would be no learning. Therefore, reading, writing, speaking and listening are to be used on a daily basis.
2. Language is to be kept whole and meaningful, rather than broken down into small, meaningless units.
3. Each student learns as an individual, meaning that each of them may formulate different understandings than other students may formulate or than what I have formulated.

Differences are to be respected, accepted and even valued.

These basic points served as my guiding principles as I designed the course and selected activities throughout the semester.

In addition, the course was run on two relatively simple, but rather significant, principles. The first of these was the PRINCIPLE OF INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY. That is, each person in the class had certain responsibilities which were to be met. My responsibilities as the teacher of the class were to provide a situation and experiences which were conducive to learning while contributing the knowledge and expertise appropriate to the course. The students were responsible to take control over their learning and to make it significant. I maintained from the beginning of the semester that each of us needed to exercise those responsibilities for the course to be successful. I could influence the students' control of their learning, but I was not able to control their acceptance of that responsibility. The students could influence the situations and experiences which I could or would provide, but they could not control the instructional strategies to be used or what would be presented. The basic control for each person in the class rested with the individual who assumed responsibility. I make this point to suggest the basic approach taken to evaluation and grading: If we each met our

responsibilities, then we would all succeed. This individual control was inherent in the systems of evaluation and grading utilized in the course.

The second principle was the PRINCIPLE OF MUTUAL RESPECT. This principle can be simply stated: I would respect and trust each of the students and they, in turn, would extend to me the same respect and trust. Unless one of us received evidence that the other was not worthy of that respect and trust, they would be offered to all involved in the course throughout the semester. Whenever one of us received such evidence, then it would be expected that the trust or respect would diminish. Whether the full level of trust or respect would be re-established would depend on what had happened and the willingness of each party to reinstate that trust or respect. For me, there were several times when I thought one or more students had demonstrated to me that such trust or respect was not deserved. I became distrustful of the student, carefully chose what I would or would not accept and monitored that student's performance very carefully. Yet such instances were rare. On the whole, the trust and respect we afforded on another resulted in experiences which were beneficial for all concerned.

Those two basic principles were very powerful as a basis for the course; the beliefs underlying each of those principles allowed us the opportunity to work together for the overall benefit of each of us. For many people, it seems obvious that

I could use those two principles only because I was teaching at the college level. Yet these are important principles operating in whole language classrooms at all levels, from preschool through graduate school. The PRINCIPLE OF INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY combined with the PRINCIPLE OF MUTUAL RESPECT form the basis for effective whole language classrooms at all levels of education.

As I reviewed the conditions under which the course would operate, my beliefs about language and learning and what I considered to be my responsibilities, I realized that in this situation language instruction was going to be quite different from language instruction in many whole language classrooms at other levels of education. The idea of establishing centers, as is characteristic of many whole language programs at the elementary level, was almost impossible since I was using the classroom for only two-and-a-half hours per week while others used the same room between class meetings. The use of thematic units, while a distinct possibility, was too cumbersome from my perspective. It was important to develop instructional strategies which were appropriate for the college level and the material involved.

One major difference existed in this course which made it considerably different from other whole language programs I had seen. In most elementary classrooms, one major focus of instruction is on learning language - learning to read, learning to write, learning to share with others through both

oral and written language. Yet the major emphasis is this course was to learn about language learning and teaching. Though similarities were necessary between this class and whole language classrooms at other levels, differences were also necessary. Those differences were largely the result of the distinction between learning language and learning about language coupled with the fact that this was a college level class.

I decided that I would use working in small groups as a major component of my approach to instruction. The students would select materials they were to read or activities they were to complete from lists of options which were provided. For some small group sessions, the topics and assignments were short term, activities assigned and completed in a single class session. Those assignments were not graded in any formal way. For example, early in the semester the students were provided copies of a statement of professional concern and responsibility for teachers which had been selected by the professor. They were instructed to read the statement from the perspective of a teacher asked to sign the declaration. They were to make any changes they considered important before they would be willing to sign it. When they returned to class, they met in small groups and discussed the declaration and what changes would be necessary before they could all agree to sign it. This led into discussions in many areas of concern to teachers, such as the role of the teacher in instruction, the

relationship between teaching and learning, the role of behavior control techniques in instruction, the value of professional judgment and the need for an understanding of instructional strategies as a teacher (including knowledge of reading in their content areas). As one might think, the discussion was at times rather fervent. Then they were asked to read the declaration again, with the changes they had made, from a different perspective, possibly from that of a school principal or member of the board of education whose teachers were presenting the declaration as a statement of what they supported. Then the question became one of, "What changes would you like to make now?" This, of course, led into a very different discussion. To some students, this approach made sense in a course on content reading in the secondary schools but most certainly could not be used in their content areas. At this point I suggested that such an activity could legitimately be used in such diverse content areas as biology and English literature. In biology the activity may center on statements regarding the ethical and moral issues of using laboratory animals for experimentation. In literature the question may be one of determining the differences between censorship and selective use of reading materials in a literature class. The point was that it is possible to involve students in considering the moral or ethical aspects of many areas of study. Such involvement could be intended to get the students involved in learning about an area of study from the

perspective of a concerned participant who is dealing with issues which are of concern to individuals working in that area.

Certain predetermined sessions were identified as "Sharing Days." On these days students came prepared to present to (or share with) other members of their group the activities they had completed and to lead a discussion on what they had done. These sessions were for credit toward their final grade. A paper was also to be completed which described what they had done and presented the implications they drew from their experience for them as future teachers. The papers were due within 24 hours of the end of the class session. That extra time was intended to allow students the opportunity to use what they learned during these Sharing Day sessions in preparing the final draft of their papers.

What I valued, and for that matter still value, most was an active exploration of the topic of content area reading by each student, rather than uniformity in thought or belief. No single activity or set of readings was absolutely essential for the education of any of the students. Instead, I wanted the students selecting activities to complete and sharing with one another the activities which they themselves decided were most appropriate for each of them.

I did not want the set of activities or readings to be self-created. After all, it was my responsibility to maintain the integrity of the course. I decided to have some degree of

control over the choices and decisions they would make. As a result, lists of options were formulated which were available to the students. Thirty-five options on one list were broken into categories. During the semester, each student was to construct one reading guide (i.e., an instructional aid designed to help the readers better understand what they were reading). Therefore, each student had to select one option from within the category called "reading guides." Besides that, each student could choose to complete four other activities from any of the other categories, with the provision that they could complete only one activity per category.

At the beginning of the semester, each student was provided all lists of options, complete requirements for assignments and schedules necessary to earn a grade in the course. (NOTE: The final option on each list was to devise an activity or to compile a set of readings of the student's own design. The one stipulation for this was that the student had to check with me before undertaking any such activity to make certain it was acceptable for meeting the requirements.) These formed the basis for small group activities which carried with them four components:

1. They were to read materials or complete activities before coming to class.
2. They were to write up the activities according to

guidelines provided.

3. They were to share in an informal manner what they had done or read in preparation for the small group session.
4. They were to listen to, react to and discuss what other members of their group had done.

In this way, all language areas were used in support of each other as the students completed each session. Also, this framework was one which, with a little creativity, could be applied to almost any academic area. To apply it, though, the students were confronted with the idea of not simply following a textbook, but instead develop ideas about how students could become actively involved in the class material.

EVALUATION AND GRADING

One way in which I could put into practice the ideas I advocated was in the area of grading and evaluation. I wanted a grading system which was consistent with academic rigor, manageable by me as the record keeper, fair to all concerned, clear in terms of the expectations and how grades were to be assigned and, finally, as non-threatening as possible to the students. I decided on a grading system which focused on six areas: attendance, participation, activities and readings, oral presentations, learning journals and a final examination. Points were awarded in each area for each item completed and

final grades were awarded on the basis of the total number of points accumulated by each student.

The process of evaluating and the process of grading are actually quite different. Much of what we did in the course was evaluated, though a large portion of it was never graded. Much of the evaluation in the course, and in the student's journals, was self-evaluation by the students themselves, informal evaluations of the work completed in small groups or in class discussions or student evaluation of the approaches to teaching. Periodically throughout the semester, the students were asked to write brief evaluations of what had happened in the course, advance written summaries of what they had learned at a particular point in the course or to project, or, based on their own knowledge and expectations, project what they expected to happen in course sessions yet to come. None of that was ever completed for a grade. As a matter of fact, much of it was completed anonymously so that it was impossible for me to know who had expressed which opinions, thus helping the students expess their ideas or advance their criticisms more feely. In this course, at least part of every course session was devoted to evaluation of some aspect of the course.

The true challenge came in evaluating and grading the work which was completed as part of the course grade. One general guideline applied to all written work completed for a grade: Students must demonstrate the ability to communicate their ideas clearly in writing with individuals other than

themselves. That was not a requirement that the students had to write perfectly, for I saw writing is a process which is never perfected but is part of the process of coming to know. I informed all students that if any particular student demonstrated a general disability in being able to communicate to others through writing, I would initiate a drop from the course for that student. This was based on my belief that any person who could not write an acceptable note home to parents or write clear lesson plans for substitute teachers to follow should not be allowed to pass a course which implied the ability to teach students effectively through written language. (NOTE: Though this policy was in force for three years, it was executed only twice. Each time I conferred with the student concerned and provided the opportunity to change their behavior in this area before the drop was initiated.)

Evaluation and grading of assignments (activities and readings) was done in a manner which was as clear cut as possible to both the students and myself. The following became the guidelines for evaluating and grading papers:

1. If the paper represented academically earnest effort, then the paper was considered on the basis of other criteria listed below. That is, each paper had to be the original work of the student, had to represent an honest effort to meet the requirements of the activity and had to be

coherent. If the paper did not represent an academically earnest effort, then it was unacceptable and received a zero grade.

2. If the student had completed each of the operations required for the assignment, then full credit was awarded. Each activity or set of readings a student completed during the semester included specific verbs which the students were to complete in their write-up. That is, each assignment included terms such as analyze, criticize, identify, explain, summarize or justify. As each paper was reviewed for quality, I examined each one to make certain that the student had completed each of the operations required for the chosen activity.
3. If the paper represented an earnest effort to meet the requirements of the assignment but failed to complete one or more of the operations required for the activity, the student received the paper back with a zero grade. However, that student then had twenty-four hours to complete the activity (which usually involved adding the missing part of the paper) and return it.
4. If a paper was not acceptable when it was turned it at first, they would have one chance, and only one chance, to make the necessary corrections or changes.

If the paper was brought into compliance with the requirements,

the full credit was given.

Though these guidelines represent a deviation from the what might be considered normal grading policies for college courses, they were viewed as necessary in order to provide clarity to both the students and myself. They also allowed the students the opportunity to maintain beliefs and positions which I neither believed nor supported. This approach to grading the papers met the criteria presented earlier. I considered this policy necessary to allow intellectual freedom so that the students could express their own ideas and positions in the course.

All written work submitted for grading was also evaluated. I promised the students that I would read every paper turned in, whether it was for a grade or as part of an evaluation of the course. This gave me the opportunity to be sensitive to what the students were saying in their writing. It also imposed on me a rather sizeable reading load. The promise was kept, though some assignments took hours to read. I also reacted to each paper - an evaluation that was quite distinct from grading. I would react to ideas, challenge or support beliefs, question what had been done, generally evaluate what was written. The quantity of my reactions varied from one paper to another. Yet, as many students informed me throughout each semester, they were anxious to receive their papers back so they could read my comments and reactions. Students responded quite positively to these reactions, primarily

because they were reactions to the content of what was being said, not criticisms based on how well they had conformed to the constraints of standard English. For many students, the reassuring knowledge that their grades were separate from these reactions allowed them greater freedom to rethink and to reevaluate their work and ideas.

As might be expected, the quality of the products submitted during course varied considerably. Some students worked for hours on each and every assignment for class, assuming personal responsibility for the learning that they were undertaking. Others worked only briefly on each assignment, spending just the time necessary to complete what they had undertaken and writing a cursory paper to be handed in. All students were informed that they were to receive full credit or no credit for the assignment based on whether or not they had met the requirements. This meant two students at either extreme of the performance continuum could receive the same credit for their work, even though the final products of the work were quite different. In large part, those differences were the responsibilities of the individual students. If I was sincere in contending that the students themselves were responsible for their own learning, then these differences could be explained by the varying degrees of responsibility the students undertook. It was at this point that the distinction between grading and evaluating became clear. While grades for two papers might have been the same,

the evaluations of two papers were seldom the same.

Grading learning journals was approached in much the same manner. If the student kept a journal with regular entries (I suggested a guideline of one entry they did something related to the class - one for each class meeting, one for each assignment they had completed and one for each time they read the text), then full credit was given. That meant that some students would write entries that were several pages long each while others might make entries which were only one or two sentences long. Once again, the students were assumed to be responsible for their learning. The differences between students were clearer here than in any other aspect of their work. Some students wrote page after page for each entry, expressing ideas confidently and freely. Others openly stated that they did not trust me, writing only short entries and often only parroting the ideas I had expressed in course. Others hated to write, and kept journal entries to only a few words at a time. I reacted to the journals and took what the students had written as constructive feedback in preparing for the subsequent course sessions.

At this point it is worth noting that for some students, those who absolutely hated keeping a journal and for whom the journals were likely to be of little benefit, an alternate way to fulfill this requirement was available. That is, those students could write a thorough review of their reactions to the course and a summary of what they had learned each time the

journals were due. This review could then be submitted to fulfill the requirements. However, the students were told that my willingness to accept the paper would be prejudiced by the fact that other people had been working on their journals on a daily basis throughout the semester. As a result, I insisted that these summaries had to be thorough and complete or they were unacceptable. Perhaps that was one factor influencing many students who did not choose this option.

The presentations of what they had done to meet the requirements were done in small groups. Since I often had as many as eight small groups working simultaneously, this meant that I was unlikely to hear more than a small part of any one presentation. The requirements for the presentations were few:

1. The students could not simply read their paper to the group. I believed that any member of the group was intelligent enough and capable enough to read the papers for themselves, if they wanted to. I wanted the presentations to recognize the audience and deal with members of that audience in a direct manner.
2. They were to briefly describe what they they had done, what they learned from what they had done and what implications they saw in what they had done for them as prospective teachers.

3. Presentations were to stimulate and invite questions or further discussion. Therefore, each student was to allow time for questions and discussions in their presentations.

At the beginning of the class sessions when they were completing these presentations in small groups, each group was provided a sign-up sheet. The sheet was passed around the group so each member of the group could sign it. Then, after all had signed, one member of the group was given the job of record keeper. As each member of the group finished the presentation, the record keeper would check off that person's name. From those sheets I recorded who had presented and gave each person who had presented full credit for that presentation.

Another peculiar element of the course was the final examination. To the surprise of the students, if they had completed all activities and received a perfect score as they went along plus completed one activity for extra credit (that was an option for those interested), they did not need to complete the final examination in order to have enough points to receive an "A". Or some students could complete only part of the final exam to accumulate enough points to earn the grade they wanted. The possibility of earning a perfect score throughout the semester was strong in light of the general approach to grading which was taken.

The final examination was to be a total of eight essay questions. They were to choose two or three (depending on the semester and the requirements which had been established) of the questions and provide in-depth answers. I also did something which totally amazed most of the students: Each student received a copy of the final examination questions at the middle of the term.

It was difficult, almost impossible, to "cheat" on the exam. The single limitation to this was that each student was to prepare or write his or her own answers, but the process of developing the answers could be shared as much as the students wished. Any resources which students could find could be used legitimately. They were invited to work together, to read the textbooks for the class or other written material, to seek help from other professors or former students. They were encouraged to learn as much as they could in any way they could in order to answer the question. I hasten to add here that the questions which I asked were not the type of questions which could be answered quickly or easily. They almost demanded discussion and exploration before they could be adequately answered. My objective here was for the students to appreciate that the teach-test-teach cycle, which is common in many classrooms at all levels of education, is often not the most effective approach to teaching. I wanted the students to experience a classroom situation where a test could truly be educational, as students are often told tests should be, but in

practice seldom are. The way the final examination was used, it provided an example of a test which provided an experience which resulted in increased learning for the students taking it.

The final examination was the only paper written by students during the semester which was given a point score for the test ranging from zero to one-hundred. That was done in large part because they had the opportunity to rewrite or add to a paper which was deficient during the semester, but that such rewriting was not possible on the final examination.

The idea that students could earn a high grade from this class without completing the final when a final exam is given is unique in my experience. While some might object to the manner in which the final examination was handled, it maintained the element of personal control. That element alone exceeded benefits which might be gained by forcing all students to complete the final examination.

The system of scoring was designed to provide clarity for what was to be done and how points would be awarded. From the method of scoring described here, one might think all the students would almost automatically receive an "A" as the final grade in this course. I taught this course to at least fifty students per semester for a total of nine semesters. Generally, between eighty-five and ninety percent of the students did receive an "A." However, ten to fifteen percent of the students received a lower grade each semester. That

reflected the notion that each of the students was invited to assume responsibility for his or her own learning. Some students simply decided that they did not need an "A." Others managed to ignore the course requirements and turned in little, if any, of the assigned work. In my opinion, some students, even at the college level, did not want to take control of their learning. As a result, several times a final grade of "D" or "F" was earned.

Not once did any member of the university faculty or administration challenge my method of grading. Yet I always felt confident that, should I have been challenged, I could have easily justified the grades on the the basis of the quality and the quantity of the work the students completed. From the perspective of academic rigor, the students often reported that they completed more and learned more during the semester in this course than many of them had completed or learned in any other college course.

CONCLUSION

I have come to the clear conclusion that whole language is both possible and desirable at the college level. Yet the whole language program at the college level is likely to be quite different from whole language programs at any other level of education. By carefully reviewing what is to be accomplished in the course and selecting instructional

strategies, evaluation methods and course content from a theoretical perspective consistent with whole language, the college teacher can conduct an effective whole language program.

Criteria for conducting evaluation and for grading within a whole language classroom at the college level must be clearly stated by the teacher and understood by the teacher and the students. Through such clarity and understanding, it is possible to establish an environment which, while not being completely risk free, minimizes the risks involved for the students and reflects the decisions they make about their learning.

One frustrating fact professors of education face is that their students are likely to teach the way they have been taught instead of how they are told they should teach. If the experience of an accepting, supportive, challenging whole language program is never part of the experiences of our students, then the chances of them using such an instructional approach are very small.

Many times while teaching those classes as well as in the time which has followed, many students have reported that this had been their favorite class in college, even though most of them had written eight to ten papers during the course of the semester. Considering that none of them were majoring in secondary education or reading, this reaction was quite surprising. Several times university supervisors for student

teachers across the state would pull me aside and tell me of the positive things the students had said about the class and the way it had been conducted. These student teachers explained that this class was one of the few experiences that had actually led them to think as teachers. The ultimate impact of this course is yet to be realized. The value of such an approach will be evident only when the students from this class become teachers and implement for themselves the educational beliefs they hold. If they implement in their classrooms ideas which are even a little more humane or more consistent with the beliefs inherent in whole language, then I believe the class was a success.